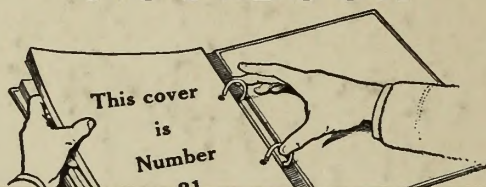


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Boston University

Graduate School

Thesis

Training the Voices of School Children

Submitted by

Esther De Vere Mac Cormac

(A.B., Boston University, 1922)

*In partial fulfilment of requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts*

1922

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The Psychology of Voice Training.

The fact that the most important feature of voice training is class singing, makes it imperative that the teacher should be well versed in the principles of group psychology. The first problem which he meets, is that of holding the attention of each individual of the group.

It has been shown by experiments, that to obtain proper attention, a period of about two seconds must elapse between the impression of ear and eye, and the response from the brain through the medium of the lips.

Other experiments prove that keenly sustained attention to any single impression is impossible after a few seconds. Thus we see that the music teacher must furnish a sufficient variety of rhythmic aids which so plentifully abound in music, in the form of accents, rests, and tonal values.

Of the three types of attention; involuntary, voluntary, and non-voluntary, the teacher must determine which will give the best results.

Involuntary attention may be momentarily attracted by raising the voice, or by performing some unusual act, but this device soon becomes ineffective, and the teacher may be forced to take recourse to the second type, or voluntary attention. By this method, attention is given by the children because of fear, or through a sense of duty to authority. Naturally enough, this kind of attention is neither flattering to the teacher, nor efficient from an educational standpoint.

Therefore, the only logical course left open is to provide something sufficiently interesting not only to obtain the initial non-voluntary attention of the child, but to retain it throughout the lesson period. Given children who are musically talented, and an orderly development of material, the problem is practically solved. But with most children, interest must be developed through special motivation, or the linking of the new material with the impulse of inherent instincts.

The instinct for self expression may be a sufficient motive for singing, especially since in the group, the individual is further impelled by the gregarious instinct, and strongly desires to act with the group. This is true, however, to a slight extent among school children.

By the keen teacher, many other fundamental instincts may be recognized and employed to obtain the desired ends of musical accomplishment.

The resourceful teacher will have many means at hand with which to gain and keep the attention of the class. One thing must be guarded against, that is, the use of long explanations concerning something entirely new to the child mind, however interesting and true it may appear to the adult. The more logical course would be to illustrate by typical example, and the child's natural imitative impulse will urge him to copy the example, a concept thereby being formed in his mind. The next step after the acquisition of the concept would be to name it, this being clearly and directly done by the teacher. In other words, present a thing, then name it.

II Breathing

. Everyone is aware that simple facts must precede complex facts, and that new material must be associated with the old in order to be grasped by the child mind. Every child is conscious that he breathes, and is aware of the necessity for so doing. When this necessary act is concerned with the production of vocal tone, the child must learn the proper control of the breath which is the motor power of singing.

It would be useless for the teacher to give a long dissertation on the mechanism and inter-relation of wind-pipe, lungs, vocal ligaments, and larynx, or to describe the elaborate system of resonance in the cavities of the chest, pharynx, and mouth. What is more important, is a carefully graded series of exercises which provide the children with a workable pattern.

The teacher himself, however, should understand the mechanism of breathing and of tone production in order that his class instruction may have meaning. The organs concerned in tone production are; the lungs, which control the motor power; the larynx, with the vocal ligaments by which the voice is actually generated, the resonating chambers, which re-inforce the power, and magnify the volume of the sounds produced in the larynx.

In rib and diaphragmatic breathing, the lungs are inflated where they are the largest and can take in the most air. The bases of the lungs are surrounded by soft and yielding parts, so that the diaphragm may be contracted and relaxed to the greatest

extent or for any length of time without fatigue. The lower ribs being attached to the backbone only, can be extended like the diaphragm.

On the other hand, in collar-bone breathing, the lungs are inflated where they are the smallest, thereby getting less air. At the top of the lungs, the movement of the ribs is impeded by the weight of the shoulder blades and the collar bones which carry the arms. The chest walls are forced upward toward the root of the neck, and thus causes constriction of the food passages and windpipe as well as congestion of the large blood vessels which are situated there.

The following are good fundamental exercises for obtaining correct rib and diaphragmatic breathing:

(1) Let the children assume the correct posture taken at the beginning of the physical culture period. Instruct them to place the hands on the lower side ribs, the points of the middle fingers nearly touching below the end of the breast bone. While the teacher counts four, inhale slowly and evenly through the nostrils, the mouth being open. Meanwhile the children should expand the ribs, thereby forcing the fingertips apart. The breath is now exhaled, in four counts, slowly and silently, the lower ribs being expanded until the end of the exhalation.

(2) Take position as in exercise (1). Inspiration takes place in six counts, the first three being occupied by the expansion of the lower ribs. With the count of four, the whole chest is filled with air. During five and six, the air is retained in the lungs, and the ribs pressed outward. With four more counts.

the breath is exhaled as in exercise (1), the chest being held high until the end.

(3) This exercise is similar to (2), except that the breath is inhaled through the mouth, and exhaled gently as if trying not to extinguish the flame of an imaginary candle held at the lips.

These exercises may be varied until good control of breath, ribs and lungs is obtained.

III Tone Production

. When the breath enters through the nostrils, the soft palate, or the back part of the roof of the mouth, is depressed on the tongue, and the passage from the throat to the mouth is quite closed, so that the escaping sound goes through the nostrils. This gives the tone a hard nasal quality.

A pure clear tone may be produced by raising the palate as in the act of yawning. Thus the entrance to the nostrils is closed and the tone comes from the mouth. Tell the children to direct the tone, using the two-lined c, at a point directly between the eyes, and this will overcome the tendency to sing with the guttural or throaty quality so common among children.

The teacher must not lose sight of the importance of example. If he cannot produce a good pattern in soprano or falsetto voice, he might allow a child who can do so to produce the required kind of tone. Children very often copy another child's tone better than that of an adult, even though the tone of the latter be perfect. A clear tone from the violin might also serve as a pattern.

In exercises for tonal beauty, only the middle tones should be employed, that is, from one-lined c to two-lined c. The melodies should be smooth and flowing in character, and sung slowly in order to give sufficient time for tonal sense, proper pitch, and mental hearing in tonal color. Slow tempo also aids in sharp, clear attack of tone, so that no scooping or slurring from one note

to another is heard.

Since sounds like "ah" are hard to place and produce correctly, they should be preceded by "loo" on the same pitch and the same adjustment of the vocal chords and other organs of voice production retained while "ah" is being sung. "Ah" has a tendency to tighten the muscles of the throat and neck to such an extent, that not only is the facial expression ridiculous, but the child is almost unable to produce a tone. To overcome this, encourage the child to relax, and to adopt a pleasant facial expression before beginning to sing.

The acquisition of beauty of tone depends on the imitative ability of the child, and on the character of the example. As a rule, children are naturally imitative, and except in the case of the monotone, little trouble will be met along this line.

Many unmusical teachers are obliged to train themselves to recognize a good tone, which must be:

- (a) clear
- (b) mellow
- (c) sweet
- (d) easily sustained
- (e) free from breathiness
- (f) produced well forward in the mouth.

A bad tone is

- (a) breathy and woolly
- (b) strident and harsh
- (c) shouting and raucous
- (d) guttural or throaty

(e) thin and reedy, or dull and muffled.

Bad tone is caused by mismanagement of the breath, faulty tone placement, singing in the wrong register, and shouting. It results in singing off pitch, forced registers, and ruined voices.

IV The Monotone

A monotone is a person who mumbles in an unmusical undertone, and who has a very slight range of pitch. This condition may be the result of:-

1. Lack of attention on the part of the child, due to fear or indifference.
2. An inherent inability to sing.
3. Physical defect of hearing or of the vocal organs
4. Improper placing of tone, wrong use of the vocal organs.

If (1) is the case, the cure depends on a proper diagnosis. Any sympathetic teacher can reassure a timid child by kindness, or an indifferent one by resorting to the stimulation of natural instincts of competition, self-expression, or gregariousness. In extreme cases, when indifference develops into stubborn refusal to sing, the cure should be that of strict discipline.

When (2) is the cause, the problem becomes more difficult. The teacher will find it necessary to practise considerable patience and to do much up-hill work. If the parents are interested, they may help train the children at home by simple school methods.

Defective organs of voice or of hearing should be referred to the proper school authorities. If the disability is removed

in time, it might be expected that the musical ability of the child will fast approach normal.

Defective voice production may be cured by imitation and suggestion. If the child is very young, let the teacher stand beside him, perhaps taking hold of his hand, coaxing him to sing. Another child who is a good singer could stand on the other side to aid him. The good singer or the class could then sing a tone, and the monotone should be required to imitate it. At first it will be difficult for him to do this, but if the class is instructed to take as many breaths as needed, it can supply a continuous example. In the meantime, the teacher can listen to the pitch as sung by the monotone. If the pitch is too low, let the teacher offer suggestions such as tapping the child's forehead, yawning and directing the tone between the eyes.

When the monotone can imitate a pitch, have the class sing two different tones, and ask the monotone which is higher. After the separate tones are learned, teach the child to sing the scale and to learn the class rote songs.

With proper treatment, the monotone type will probably disappear by the end of the third grade. A reappearance may occur in the eighth grade at the period of changing voices among the boys, but this is generally a fancied rather than a real condition. If the boy is not arbitrarily placed in the bass, he can be trained to use and not misuse his voice. Monotones may best be placed in the front of the room, with stronger singers carefully graded toward the back.

V The Registers

*It is a well established fact that at a pitch around one-lined *f*, there is a break in the tones of the voice that is known as the "great break" between the registers. A register is a series of tones of like quality producible by a particular adjustment of the vocal chords. The thin register contains the tones above one-lined *f* and is the one which should be cultivated in the school. It is also called the head register. The chest, or thick register, is the more abused one, and it comprises the tones below *f*. The registers should be so blended that the break is not apparent.*

*Starting on two-lined *c*, a tone produced only in the thin register, the child should be required to sing "loo". This syllable is the most natural to the child, since even the baby in the cradle voluntarily uses such sounds as "coo", "loo" and "boo". The child should be instructed to sing the scale downward, meanwhile directing the tone between the eyes. This will insure a development of the tones of the thin register.*

The thick register, however, must not be forced upward. To do so would cause

- 1. flattening of pitch*
- 2. uncertainty of intonation*
- 3. inability to sing pianissimo passages*

4. lack of power to sustain high notes
5. shortness of breath
6. development of a coarse raucous tone

When the descending scale is mastered, the ascending one may be practised in the thin register only.

The most powerful factor in the use and development of the thin register is the raising of the soft palate. This may be effected by directing the tone between the eyes, also by pretending to yawn before emitting a tone. Such exercises will

- a. develop the tones of the thin register.
- b. form the automatic habit of producing every tone in the proper register.

Closely linked with the subject of registers is that of resonance. The soft palate forms a curtain-like obstruction at the back of the mouth. When it is raised, the resonating cavity of the mouth is larger. If, however, the palate lies upon the tongue, the sound coming from the larynx cannot enter the mouth, but must go through the nostrils, and a strident, nasal quality will result.

The following is an exercise for the control of the palate:

Depress the palate by inspiring slowly through the nostrils. Open the mouth, then exhale through it. This will raise the palate.

Other methods for obtaining resonance are as follows:-

*Always keep the cavity of the chest well filled
with air.*

While singing, keep the mouth properly open.

*Sound should be directed to the front of the mouth, so
that it does not escape through the nostrils.*

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VI Classification of Voices.

When the children's voices begin to change character, it will be necessary to classify them.

In the first few grades, the range of voices will be practically in the compass of the staff. This range will be slightly extended in the fifth grade and this is the best time for part singing.

In the sixth grade, however, it would be well to test the voices, and assign definite parts. Three-part singing will be employed at this time.

Voices are most easily classified by using a piano, sounding two-lined c, and having the child sing down the scale to one-lined c. Gradually work upward to two-lined g. If the tone quality in the upper tones is pure, free, without strain, not too thin, and seems to be the place in which the child can produce the best tone, he may be considered in the first soprano group. If not, have him sing down from one-lined b. If the quality of the lower tones is full, round and free, and not as good on the upper tones, let him sing alto. If the upper tones are best, and the lower ones weak, let him sing second soprano.

In the case of children who can sing high or low equally well, the classification will depend on the quality or timbre of the voice, this quality being easily matched to the character of the part.

A boy with an unchanged soprano voice can often very easily sing as high as two-lined a, and he may therefore be retained as a soprano for a while. If the high notes require an effort, he may be transferred to the alto.

It is a fallacy to say that a boy must not sing at the time of change or "breaking" of his voice. It is true that the boy's voice does change just as much as his physical nature develops from boyhood to manhood. The boy's nature tempts him to shout and scream while at play, and thus he tightens the muscles of his throat, and nearly ruins his speaking and singing voice. If this misuse is kept up, and no relief from constant strain is given, the voice will doubtless strain to the breaking point. This is "natural" with the boy inasmuch as it has been common, but it can be avoided by judicious training.

During the period of childhood, the boy's voice closely resembles that of a girl, and thus the boy can easily sing soprano. When boyhood approaches, the boy should no longer sing soprano exclusively, but should train his voice gradually downward, by singing alto.

When the boy's physical nature has changed to that of a man, the voice should further descend to a tenor or bass which will not be as robust as that of a mature man. Thus the strain on the delicate organs is released, the boy's voice lowers and deepens as gradually as his physical change, and the "break" or collapse of the voice is avoided.

VII Music Interpretation

In order that music may not become uninteresting and unattractive, the power of interpretation must be a tool possessed by every child.

We would hardly expect a child to sing or play a piece of music with any interpretative ability, unless his attention were called to the fact that there is a vast store of meaning behind any musical composition. It would mean little for him to accent certain tones, and to keep correct time or rhythm, for the piece would still lack musical meaning.

In order to make the child appreciate the musical idea of the piece, we must explain that composers had definite thoughts and feelings which they expressed by means of musical tones. The child mind frequently responds to these explanations more readily than the adult mind.

The rote song is an excellent way in which to teach interpretation. Great care should be taken in the choice of these songs, the music and the words being of the same related type, and of high grade. If we sing of falling rain, the music should suggest it; if we sing of gay events, the music should not sound like a funeral dirge. When the words tell

a story, the teacher should explain it in such a way that the proper emotions are stirred in the children. Let the teacher sing the song in its entirety, giving it the correct interpretation, then it may be taught to the children, phrase by phrase.

At lease forty songs should be learned in this way in the first and second grades, not so many in the third, and few after that, for the children are then able to read music from the book. Interpretation should be insisted upon until, in the higher grades songs can be sung at sight with some interpretative feeling. In the higher grades, the class will be aided by the rote-song foundation and the wider variety of emotional experiences they have acquired.

Phonogtaph records may be employed with satisfactory results, by explaining the setting of a song, the meaning behind the words, and the kind of interpretation to be listened for. Compositions without words may be used, letting the children write their own interpretations. If the composer has written one, read this to the class before the record is played.

VIII Music Reading

The essentials in music reading are: the ability to read notes and signs; a good sense of rhythm; a knowledge of how to find "do" or the keynote. With these fundamental principles, any degree of proficiency may be acquired with practice.

When the first grade has mastered at least twenty rote songs, and can sing them with good tone and interpretation, the first lesson in music reading may be taken. The aim is to read the music; the method may vary according to individual taste or the method studied. The following method is a good one. Teach the scale by rote, either as contained in a pattern song, or using the scale as a song. The syllable names attached to the scale namely; do, re, mi, fa, sol, la and ti, should be thoroughly learned at this time. The tone should first be sung by the teacher, then imitated by the class before it is named.

Only such theory as is indispensable should be explained in the lower grades. Staff dictation with easy step-wise exercises, may be followed later by exercises including such intervals as do-mi, mi-sol, may be undertaken. All intervals should be prepared before attempted.

A lesson in a new rhythm is generally found interesting. The principle is to sing the rhythm, have the class imitate it, and express individual ideas concerning it. It should then be depicted on the staff, named and defined. Oral drill and staff dictation should include the new rhythm in different combinations with older rhythms, no skips being taken in the new rhythm until the class is familiar with it. The corresponding rest should be taught with each new rhythm.

The names of the keys, and the staff letter names should not be taught in the lower grades.

There are two kinds of dictation, that of time, and that of tune. All dictation should be given sparingly and to the point, musically, and in an interesting manner. It should not be promiscuously or aimlessly used, and should not be extended over a long period of time.

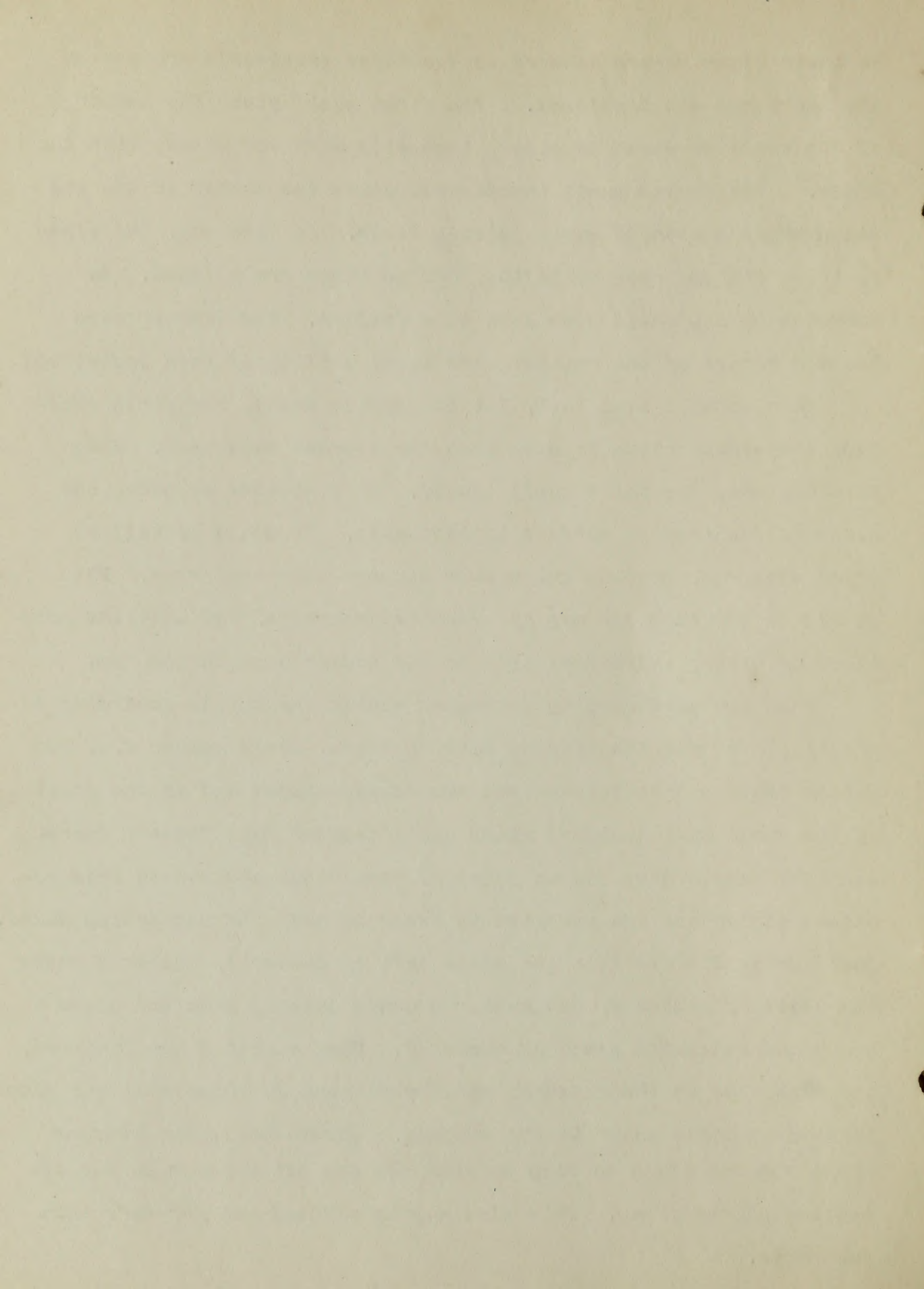
In addition to general class work, some time should be given to individual instruction. This helps the child, not only musically, but in a general way. It establishes self-reliance, accuracy, quickness of thinking under trying circumstances. The two methods of carrying on individual work are by using individual slips, and with the text book.

With individual slips, that is, slips of paper containing one measure or more of music. At the word of command, these slips, together with a blank piece of paper, are quickly passed up each aisle, one of each being given to every child. The individual slips should be distributed face downward. When every child has one, the teacher says "Study" and the slips are turned over and studied until the teacher says "Ready". Two pupils arise. The others begin to write

on their blank papers answers to questions previously written on the board and now disclosed. The first pupil gives the number of his exercise which he sings, then sits down and writes with the class. The second pupil immediately gives the number of his and sings, while the third pupil quietly rises. In this way, the class is on its own responsibility, and no stops are allowed. An omission by any child goes down as a failure. The teacher also keeps a record of the rhythmic and tonal ability of each individual.

When using a text book, let two pupils stand, the first singing, the second ready to sing when the teacher says next. When this happens, the third pupil stands. If a mistake is made, the class is required to correct it instantly. It would be well to grade each row, putting the weaker singers near the front. The pupils in the back row may be appointed monitors, and have the privilege of giving individual help to the weaker ones in the row.

When two part singing is begun, number the pupils according to ability, and have the singing done by pairs. Duets number 1, 2, and 3 take their places between the two center aisles and at the front of the room. Duet number 1 sings until teacher says "Next", whereupon the pupils step one in front of each aisle and retain this position throughout the exercise in order to help the succeeding duets. Duet number 2 steps into the place left by number 1, number 3 takes the place of number 2, and number 4 comes quietly from the class group and takes the place of number 3. When number 2 has finished, the pupils go to their seats, and the various duets move up one place, letting no break occur in the singing. Occasionally the teacher might ask the class to sing so that she can get a check on the attention of the group. This plan may be carried out for more than two parts.



Good position while singing should be required of the class without any word from the teacher. A correct position will tend to promote an active mind and an increase in musical skill.

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Summary

It has been universally recognized that many voices have been ruined because of lack of proper training during the earlier years of a child's life. The public school has undertaken the responsibility of trying to save and train the voices of the children under its care.

In order to do this, the music teacher must know not only the child, physically and psychologically, but must also know the subject in relation to the child.

This is a difficult problem. Into it enter, the mechanism of breathing, tone production and the registers as well as the more or less complicated problem of the monotone.

The boy's voice at the "break" period is a difficulty to be overcome, as well as the long processes of music reading and interpretation.

The teacher finds it necessary to constantly guard against individual misuse of the voice; must be able to determine the cause of such and try to cure it.

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